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ABSTRACT

Based on Upton Sinclair's novel "The Jungle," this lesson plan presents activities in which students make a list of books that convey strong social messages, discuss the literary strengths and weaknesses of these books, and understand how literature reflects life and can be used as a vehicle to bring about change. It includes objectives, materials, procedures, adaptations, discussion questions, evaluation methods, extension activities, annotations of suggested readings and web links, vocabulary, and related academic standards and benchmarks addressed in the lesson plan. The lesson plan also contains a description of a video clip related to the lesson, comprehension questions related to the video clip, and answers to those comprehension questions. (RS)

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Assignment Discovery Online Curriculum

Lesson title:
The Power of Fiction

Grade level:
9-12

Subject area:
Literature, U.S. History

Duration:
One class period

Objectives:
Students will do the following:
- Make a list of books that convey strong social messages
- Discuss the literary strengths and weaknesses of these books
- Understand how literature reflects life and can be used as a vehicle to bring about change

Materials:
- *The Jungle*, by Upton Sinclair (one copy for each student)
- Other books with social-action themes.

Procedures:

1. Discuss *The Jungle*, by Upton Sinclair, reviewing the main literary elements of the book: the setting, plot, characters, and central conflict.

2. Discuss the tradition from which this book came. Explain that in the early 1900s, some writers were engaging in a style of investigative journalism known as muckraking. Their goal was to reveal social injustices, especially in American business and industry. Sinclair focused on the unsanitary conditions and corrupt management of the meatpacking industry. Published in 1906, this book succeeded in getting the attention of President Theodore Roosevelt, who appointed a commission of inquiry against the meatpacking industry. Although the commission exonerated the packers, Sinclair's book exerted pressure that resulted in a second commission and the passing of the Beef Inspection Act.

3. Ask students whether they think *The Jungle* is successful as both fiction and muckraking journalism, or just as the latter. Discuss why it is difficult for a literary work to accomplish both goals. For example, it is a challenge to dramatize social issues and make them believable. Often the characters are portrayed as symbols, rather than real people.

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4. Tell students that during this lesson they will delve into the issue of social action versus fiction. Working in groups of four or five, have students develop a list of at least five other books with social themes that led to political and societal changes or heightened awareness of problems. These books can come from any author, past or present. Tell students to try to pick one book from each of the following categories:
   - Civil rights
   - Women's rights
   - Children's rights
   - International issues
   - The immigrant experience

5. If students have trouble coming up with book titles, you can suggest the books listed below. They may help students think of similar books they have read. A brief description of each book is included.

   Civil Rights
   Native Son, by Richard Wright. Written in 1940, Wright's first novel is the story of Bigger Thomas, a young African American man living in Chicago who commits a murder. The police pursue him ruthlessly, and he is ultimately sentenced to death. The book reveals the atmosphere of racial prejudice in the United States in the 1930s.

   The Color Purple, by Alice Walker. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1983, the author tells how black women struggled with racism and sexism in the early 1900s.

   To Kill a Mockingbird, by Harper Lee. Set in Alabama in the 1950s, the book tells the story from a young girl's perspective of a black man wrongfully accused of raping a white woman. The incident and the trial that ensued had long-lasting ramifications for everyone in the town.

   Women's Rights
   Fear of Flying, by Erica Jong. This book presents one woman's idea of what it means to be a liberated woman in the early 1970s.

   The Handmaiden's Tale, by Margaret Atwood. An allegorical science fiction novel that shows how women were treated before feminism took hold.

   Sister Carrie, by Theodore Dreiser. Set in Chicago in the early 1900s, the book portrays life for a young woman living alone and working in a factory. Through his narrative, Dreiser conveys her vulnerability and powerlessness.

   Children's Rights
   Oliver Twist, by Charles Dickens. This early 19th century book was written to expose the harshness of life in orphanages and on the streets for homeless young boys.

Homecoming, by Cynthia Voigt. Written in the early 1980s, the book depicts the emotional scars children feel when a parent leaves for no apparent reason.

International Issues
Cry, the Beloved Country, by Alan Paton. This book, written in 1948, was one of the first to speak out against apartheid in South Africa.

Things Fall Apart, by Chinua Achebe. In a portrait of a his own traditional village culture in Africa, the author tries to inform the world about Ibo cultural traditions and remind his own people of their past.

The Immigrant Experience
The Joy Luck Club, by Amy Tan. Told through the eyes of a Chinese American daughter of an immigrant, the book conveys the difficulties a group of women faced in China and the obstacles they experienced when they came to America.

Grapes of Wrath, by John Steinbeck. A dramatization of the harsh realities migrant farmers experienced in California during the early 1930s.

Native Speaker, by Chang-Rae Lee. A contemporary look at the alienation that many young Korean Americans face.

6. Give each group about 20 minutes to compile its list. Tell students to include books that all or most members of the group have read. Ask the groups to consider the dilemma of literature versus muckraking by answering the following questions for at least three of the books on their lists:
- Do you think the book succeeds in muckraking? Why or why not? Describe a political or societal change that may have resulted from this book. If no actual change can be documented, discuss whether the book resulted in heightened awareness of a particular issue.
- Do you think the book succeeds as fiction? Are the characters compelling? Do they have a conflict to resolve? Is it resolved in a dramatic yet plausible way?
- Do you think the book would have been more successful as nonfiction? Why or why not?

7. Discuss how many of the books succeed in being great stories and in muckraking. What makes those books stand out? Why it is difficult for one book to accomplish both goals?

Discussion Questions:
1. Is *The Jungle* more effective as fiction or muckraking? Give reasons to support your ideas.

2. What can you learn about a culture at a particular time by reading a book with a social message? Do you think novels are more successful than nonfiction in portraying a period? Give reasons to support your ideas.

3. Describe two or three movies that carry social messages. What are the messages? Were they successful as movies? Why or why not?

Evaluation:
Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate how well students understand the characteristics of fiction writing and muckraking, are able to think of similar types of books on different subjects, and participate in class discussions.

Three points: deep understanding of the characteristics of fiction writing and muckraking; strong knowledge of similar books on other subjects; active participation in class discussions.

Two points: on-grade grasp of the characteristics of fiction writing and muckraking; average knowledge of similar books on other subjects; somewhat active participation in class discussions.

One point: a weak understanding of the characteristics of fiction writing and muckraking; below-average knowledge of similar books on other subjects; weak participation in class discussions.

Extension:
Write Your Own Social Action Piece
In the spirit of Upton Sinclair, Harper Lee, and other writers with a social conscience, have students write short stories about injustices they have observed. The stories could be about urban crime, the plight of homeless people, child abuse, or any other subject. Remind students that a fictional story should have a plot, characters, a conflict, and resolution.

Suggested Reading

The 1900s (America's Decades series)
Myra H. Immell, editor. Greenhaven Press, 2000.
Useful as a snapshot of what America was like during the first decade of the 20th century, this book contains separate essays by a wide range of authors on topics divided into six sections: the beginning of a new century, American daily life, politics and reform, technology and discovery, American interests abroad, and changes from the previous century. An essay on the muckrakers describes the circumstances that propelled them into print. This is an excellent overview of important topics.

Good Girl Work: Factories, Sweatshops, and How Women Changed Their Role in the American Workforce
Catherine Gourley. Millbrook Press, 1999.
A brief history of the rise of child labor (in particular, female child labor) as the industrial revolution swept across the United States, especially in the field of mill workers, is presented here. The early 1900s began an era of reform in child labor, with social

movements working to institute child labor laws. The famous Triangle Factory Fire in 1911 helped bring inhumane working conditions to the attention of the public and eventually resulted in the rise of unions and better working conditions.

"How a Food Safety Myth Became a Legend."
Lawrence W. Reed. Consumer Research Magazine, February 1995.
In this brief article, the author disputes the working conditions that Upton Sinclair brought to light in his novel The Jungle. Mr. Reed explains Sinclair's reasons for writing the book, which had more to do with promoting socialism then reforming the meatpacking industry. An inset in the article compares several passages from the novel with actual conditions in the meatpacking plants.

Vocabulary:
muckraking
Definition: A type of journalism, begun in the early 1900s, that seeks to disclose the corruptness of business, industry, and government.
Context: *The Jungle* is an excellent example of **muckraking** because its story exposed corruption in the meatpacking industry.

progressive movement
Definition: A campaign in the late 1800s and early 1900s for economic, political, and social reform in the United States.
Context: The economic reforms of the **progressive movement** included increased government regulation of business and a series of tax reforms.

Upton Sinclair (1878-1968)
Definition: Author of *The Jungle* and other books, plays, and articles, all of which focused on social injustices and aimed at improving working conditions.
Context: **Upton Sinclair's** books brought social injustices to light and brought him wealth and fame.

Academic Standards:
This lesson adheres to the following standards from the National Council of Teachers of English:

1. Students read a range of texts to build an understanding of literature, the culture of the United States and the world, and themselves.
2. Students read a range of literature from any period in any genre to build an understanding of the human experience.

Credit:
Marilyn Fenichel, a freelance writer and curriculum developer.

This lesson was developed in consultation with Lisa Green, high school literature teacher.

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Video Information and Comprehension Questions

Video Description
Upton Sinclair's groundbreaking exposé of Chicago's meatpacking industry was a horror story of unsanitary conditions, food poisoning, and child labor abuse. Learn what led Sinclair into this turn-of-the-century urban "jungle" and how his book prompted Congress to pass the first food safety laws.

View Lesson Plan ⓟ | Purchase This Video ⓟ

Download Comprehension Questions & Answers ⓟ

The Comprehension Questions are available to download as an RTF file. You can save the file to your desktop and open it in a word processing program.

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TITLE OF VIDEO:

Great Books: The Jungle

VIDEO COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS:

1. What was Upton Sinclair's goal in writing *The Jungle*?

2. What were some of the problems in the meat-packing plants?

3. The tragedies that the family experiences in *The Jungle* were unlikely, in reality, to have happened to one family; rather they represented the tragedies experienced by families in general. What were some of the misfortunes they experienced?

4. How did the publication of *The Jungle* affect American society and legal policy?

5. How did Sinclair think his characters would stir America's heart?

6. According to Sinclair, what political group was going to provide a solution to the meat-packing plant problem?

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Great Books: The Jungle

VIDEO COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

1. What was Upton Sinclair's goal in writing *The Jungle*?

Sinclair targeted meat-packing corporations for their savage treatment of workers. He wanted the public to know about the horrible conditions and to take action to correct the situation.

2. What were some of the problems in the meat-packing plants?

Because there were no safety controls in place, workers endured dangerous and unhealthy conditions. For example, men lost fingers to the acid, fell into boiling vats of liquid, and slipped on the blood-soaked floors. Workers were not the only victims of unethical practices. Filth from the floor was swept up and sold as canned meat. During the Spanish-American War, more soldiers died from eating this tainted meat than died in combat.

3. The tragedies that the family experiences in *The Jungle* were unlikely, in reality, to have happened to one family; rather they represented the tragedies experienced by families in general. What were some of the misfortunes they experienced?

Some of the tragedies were illness and death, job loss, infant mortality, jail time, loss of home and property, loss of integrity, loss of hope.

4. How did the publication of *The Jungle* affect American society and legal policy?

Readers were outraged by the descriptions of factories that poisoned their food with deadly diseases. The public outcry that *The Jungle* caused made Congress pass the 1906 Meat Inspection Act. Still not satisfied because working conditions were so poor, Sinclair continued to publish scathing editorials that angered President Theodore Roosevelt. Over the next few years, laws were passed prohibiting fillers and impurities, and U.S. Department of Agriculture inspectors were posted in every plant in the United States.

5. How did Sinclair think his characters would stir America's heart?

Sinclair hoped that showing how good people are corrupted by conditions of slave labor would move his readers. He believed that suffering and starving immigrants were an American disgrace and hoped that readers would be embarrassed that their country did not treat its immigrants humanely.

6. According to Sinclair, what political group was going to provide a solution to the meat-packing plant problem?

Sinclair believed that the members of the socialist political party would stir the workers to stand up for themselves and fight for better working conditions.

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